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**The word for “nine” in Moroccan Arabic
and other euphemisms related to numbers**

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THE WORD FOR “NINE” IN MOROCCAN ARABIC AND OTHER EUPHEMISMS RELATED TO NUMBERS

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1.1. In congresses and workshops, dialectologists specializing in Morocco or Algeria often have to answer the following question, asked by colleagues not acquainted with Western North African dialects: “How can you explain that the word for “nine” in Maghribī Arabic is *təṣʿūd*?”

The answer is very simple: *təṣʿūd* means “you will be happy” and it is a euphemism in order to avoid *təṣʿa* which means “nine” but also “you will beg,”¹ a highly impolite phrase. This euphemism is well-known; G.S. Colin, for instance, explained the word *təṣʿūd* as follows:²

*n[om] de nombre neuf; le chiffre 9 [litt.: puisses-tu être heureux! euph. employé pour éviter تسعة təṣʿa qui sonne comme تسعی təṣʿa: puisses-tu être réduit à la mendicité].*³

1.2. In Morocco the word *təṣʿūd* is widely used,⁴ and appears also in Berber dialects. In Algeria it is found mainly in the Western dialects

¹From the root *ṣʿ-y*; perfect *ṣʿa*, imperfect *yiṣʿa* in Morocco. In quotations from other authors (and in order to avoid confusion), I have here sometimes slightly simplified phonetic transcriptions, especially concerning vowels.

²*Apud* De Prémare, *Dictionnaire*, vol. 6, p. 100. As far as I can see, this etymology was at first formulated by W. Marçais in 1902 (cf. *Tlemcen*, pp. 156 and 284; cf. also W. Marçais, “L’euphémisme,” pp. 437–438).

³Cf. also Ph. Marçais, *Esquisse*, p. 174: “(*təṣʿōd* et *təṣʿūd* sont) formes euphémistiques qui rattachent le nom à la racine *ṣʿd* qui exprime l’idée de ‘bonheur’.”

⁴See for instance Vicente, *Anjra*, p. 156; Caubet, *L’arabe*, vol. 1, p. 147; Aguadé &

(Oran, Nedroma, Tlemcen, for instance):⁵ Eastern Algerian as well as Tunisian and Libyan dialects have *təs'a* instead of *təs'ūd*.⁶

In Mauritania *təs'ūd* is also unknown and only *təs'a* is used (in Ḥassaniyya the verb *s'a* means “to plunder, to obtain booty”⁷). Maltese has *disgha* (< *tis'a*).

2.1. However, the fact that *təs'ūd* is a euphemism and comes from the verb *s'əd* “to be (or become) happy” does not solve all the questions related to this word. A significant difficulty arises immediately: *t/ə/s'əd* “you will be happy” is the regular form for the 2nd person of the imperfect singular of this verb; this requires an explanation of the pattern *təs'ūd*, with a long vowel *ū* instead of *ə* in the last syllable.

2.2. The German dialectologist Georg Kampffmeyer saw in this vowel *ū* a parallelism to the first ten cardinal numbers in Ethiopian (Ge'ez).⁸ His theory is, however, not convincing at all. First, (as he himself remarks) in Ethiopian the vowel *u* appears at the end of the numerals (3–10 = *šälästu*, *ärba'tu*, *ḥāməstu*, *sedestu*, *sāb'atu*, *sāmanitu/sāmantu/sāmāntu*, *tes'ātu/tās'ātu*, *āšārtu*) and second, it is not easy to explain how such an Ethiopian feature came to surface in Morocco.

2.3. I think matters are not so complex and it is unnecessary to go to such great lengths when addressing this issue. In fact, the form *təs'ūd* can be easily explained as a pattern shift from {1ə23ə4}⁹ (= *təs'əd*) to {1ə23ū4} (= *təs'ūd*), *təs'əd* being understood not as a verb but rather as a quadriradical substantive and being the pattern {1ə23ū4} (as well as its variants {1ə23ī4} and {1ə23ā4}) by far more common in Moroccan Arabic than {1ə23ə4}.¹⁰

Elyaacoubi, *Skūra*, p. 116; Durand, *Profilo*, pp. 109–110; Heath, *Jewish and Muslim dialects*, pp. 464–465. However, the form *təs'a* is sometimes heard among rural speakers (Harrell, *Reference grammar*, p. 90, note 23).

⁵W. Marçais, *Saïda*, p. 144. Cf. also Grand'Henry, *Cherchell*, p. 124 and Madouni, *Dictionnaire*, p. 82.

⁶Cf. for instance Ph. Marçais, *Esquisse*, p. 174.

⁷Taine-Cheikh, *Dictionnaire*, vol. 5, p. 993.

⁸Cf. “Šāuia in Marokko,” p. 46; “Weiter möchte ich auch die Endung von *tis'ūt* [sic] = neun zu den *ū* stellen, das am Ende äthiopischer Zahlwörter bis 10 erscheint.”

⁹Diachronically Moroccan *ə* represents any short vowel in classical Arabic.

¹⁰Cf., for instance, substantives like: *kərmūš* “figs,” *qəzbūr* “coriander,” *šəndūq* “box,” *ḥəṭḥūt* “a kind of bread (Skūra),” *bəhlūl* “simple-minded,” *bərqūq* “plums, prunes,” *bəzbūz* “faucet,” *məlyūn* “million,” *bəbbūš* “snails,” *bərgūt* “fleas,” *dəbbūz* “cudgel, club,” *dərbūz* “balustrade,” *fəggūs* “variety of cucumber,” *fəkrūn* “turtle,” *fəllūs* “chick,” *təbbūz* “corpulent,” *fərrūz* “cock,” *gəmgūm* “snout, muzzle,” *gərnūg* “crane,” *šənnūf* “wedge (of orange, melon),” *ḥəllūf* “pig.”

2.4. Examples of such a shift are numerous:¹¹

CA <i>qūnfūd</i>	>	Moroccan <i>gənfūd</i> "hedgehog"
CA <i>hūnfūs</i>	>	Moroccan <i>hənfūs</i> "beetle"
CA <i>būhnūq</i>	>	Moroccan <i>bəhnūq</i> "cloth, veil"
CA <i>būlbūl</i>	>	Moroccan <i>bəlbūl</i> "nightingale" ¹²
CA <i>hūdhūd</i>	>	Moroccan <i>hədhūd</i> "hoopoe"
CA <i>zūmūrrūd</i>	>	Moroccan <i>zəmrūd</i> ¹³ "emerald"
CA <i>qūmqūm</i>	>	Moroccan <i>qəmqūm</i> "a kind of copper jug"
CA <i>qūrbūz</i> / <i>ǧūrbūz</i>	>	Moroccan <i>gərbūz</i> ¹⁴ "nasty, ugly black or Berber man"
CA <i>mišmiš</i>	>	Moroccan <i>məšmāš</i> "apricot"
CA <i>ʿāqʿāq</i>	>	Moroccan <i>ʿəqʿāq</i> ¹⁵ "magpie"
CA <i>mīʿraǧ</i>	>	Moroccan <i>məʿrāž</i> "ladder"
CA <i>hānǧar</i>	>	Moroccan <i>hūnžār</i> "curved dagger"
CA <i>hālḥāl</i>	>	Moroccan <i>həlhāl</i> "anklet, anklet ornament"
CA <i>rāfrāf</i>	>	Moroccan <i>rəfrāf</i> "curtain"
CA <i>dūmlūǧ</i>	>	Moroccan <i>dəmlīž</i> "bracelet"

2.5. In my opinion these examples show clearly that it is reasonable to assume that the form *təsʿūd* is merely due to a shift from *təsʿəd* to a more usual pattern.

3. It is well-known that euphemisms play an important role in all languages; North African Arabic dialects are of course not an exception; quite the opposite: in these dialects they are especially frequent and widespread. Some examples of common euphemisms in Moroccan Arabic are:¹⁶

- *ʿāfya* (= originally "health") is the most common word for "fire" because *nār* (= originally "fire") means "hell, hell-fire";
- the *žnūn* "genies, jinns" are called *lə-mlūk* "the owners," *sādātna* and also *siyādna* "our lords," *ržāl l-māḥfūyya* "the men of the hidden," *lə-žwād* "the bountiful," *lə-msəlmīn* "the Moslems," etc.;
- a person who is blind is called *bšīr* "sharp-eyed" (to avoid *ʿma* "blind")¹⁷;

¹¹However, there is also an important number of examples where the pattern {1ə23ə4} has been retained: *fəlfəl* "red pepper," *sənbəl* "a kind of hyacinth," *dərḥəm* "dirham," *ʿəqrəb* "scorpion," *ʿənbəṛ* "ambergris," *fəndəq/fəndəq* "inn, warehouse," etc.

¹²The variant *bəlbəl* also exists; cf. De Prémare, *Dictionnaire*, vol. 1, p. 293.

¹³The variants *zmūrṛūd*, *zməṛṛəd*, *zəmrūd*, *zəmrəd* also exist; cf. De Prémare, *Dictionnaire*, vol. 5, p. 373.

¹⁴On *qūrbūz/ǧūrbūz* see Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān*, vol. 5, p. 318. On Moroccan *gərbūz*, see W. Marçais, *Tanger*, p. 439, and De Prémare, *Dictionnaire*, vol. 10, p. 698. About the dissimilation class. Arabic *ǧ* > Moroccan *g* in contact with sibilants, cf. Heath, *Jewish and Muslim dialects*, pp. 133–134.

¹⁵The variant *ʿəgʿəg* also exists (De Prémare, *Dictionnaire*, vol. 9, p. 183).

¹⁶Examples from W. Marçais, "L'euphemisme," p. 426 ss., and Westermarck, *Ritual*, vol. 2, p. 26 ss. and vol. 1, p. 262 ss. See also Aguadé, "Morocco," p. 293.

¹⁷On this word, see also Fischer, "Arab. *bašīr*" (with examples from medieval

— *ṛṣās* “lead” is called *ḥfīf* “light”;

— the use of *sārūt* “key” (a word of Berber origin) instead of *māftāḥ* in many Moroccan dialects¹⁸ is the result of a peculiar semantic shift: *māftāḥ* (originally “key”) being the usual word for “needle” (to avoid *ibra*),¹⁹ it was necessary to find a new term for “key” and so this Berber loanword has been borrowed.

4.1. As far as numbers are concerned, euphemisms are of course not restricted to *tās‘a* “nine”; they are also common in connection with other numbers, as we can see in some interesting examples I will quote here.

The Finnish anthropologist Edvard Westermarck²⁰ comments in his study *Ritual and belief in Morocco* that when measuring valuable goods (grain for instance) people try to impart to them as much *bāraka* as possible and to ward off evil influences and to avoid anything which might harm them. Thus when counting it is very common to use lucky words or phrases instead of the ordinary numerals and to take care not to mention dangerous numbers:²¹

In the Ġarbīya I heard the following counting: — *Bārka mēn āllāh, ḥādi barkt‘āin, ḥādi tlāt‘a, ḥādi arb‘a, ḥādi ḥámsa f‘ain yīblis, ḥādi sétt‘a, ḥādi net‘mēnnau āllāh l-bāraka, ḥādi nēs‘áu āllāh t-t‘āuba u l-ġófran, ḥādi ‘ásra u ṣḥāb n-nbi rasūlu llah*, “Blessing from God, here two blessings, here three, here four, here five in the eye of the devil,²² here six, here easy (instead of ‘seven’, which is called ‘difficult’ in the common phrase *séb‘a ṣ‘aiba*), here we wish for a blessing from God (instead of ‘eight’, *t‘mēnya*, on account of its phonetical re-

Arabic sources).

¹⁸In the dialect spoken in Casablanca, for instance.

¹⁹It is unlucky to mention any sharp object, especially in the morning (cf. Westermarck, *Ritual*, vol. 2, p. 26).

²⁰About him, see his *Memories of my life* and Suolinna, Hällström and Lahtinen, *Portraying Morocco*.

²¹*Ritual*, vol. 2, pp. 239–240. See also Laoust, *Mots et choses*, pp. 403–404 (with very similar examples from Berber-speaking regions).

²²See on this Westermarck, *Ritual*, vol. 2, p. 447: “To such an extent has the number five been associated with the idea of the evil eye that it is considered improper to mention the word for it in conversation with a government official, or even to mention any number reminiscent of it, like fifteen, twenty-five, or fifty. Instead of these numbers you should say ‘four and one’, ‘fourteen and one’, ‘twenty-four and one’, ‘forty-nine and one’, or also, for example, ‘twenty-four and one’, ‘twenty-six less one’. If *ḥámsa* is used the angry answer will be, *ḥámsa ‘āla ‘ain š-šīṭān*, ‘five on the devil’s eye’. Another way of avoiding the word *ḥámsa* is to say *yéddāk*, ‘your hand’, an expression which is also used in conversation between women. If, for instance, at Fez a woman asks another woman how many loaves of bread she put into the oven, the answer will be *yéddāk*, in the case they were five.”

semblance to *net^sménnau*), here we ask God for repentance and forgiveness (instead of 'nine', *ts^a*), here ten and the friends of the Prophet the apostle of God²³."

The Arabs from the Ḥiáina say, *Bárka men álláh, barkt^sáin, tlát^sa, árb^a, u árb^a, ha sétt^sa, sáhla, net^sménnau l-ḥair* 'and álláh, nes^aáu l-ḥair 'and álláh, 'ásra ṣḥāb n-nbi, ḥādás ḥot^s sídna Yúsef, āṭnās āṭnāšar šhar, "Blessing from God, two blessings, three, four, and four (instead of 'five'), here six, easy (instead of 'seven'), we wish for good from God (instead of 'eight'), we beg for good from God (instead of 'nine'), ten the friends of the Prophet, eleven, the brothers of our lord Yúsef, twelve twelve months." Then the counting is continued in the ordinary manner except that all numbers containing either five or seven are avoided; thus instead of fifteen is said "and fourteen."

4.2. In a text published in 1908, the French Arabist Edmond Doutté speaks about the reluctance of the Algerians to count and gives some very similar examples to those mentioned by his Finnish colleague:²⁴

Une des formes les plus curieuses de cette répugnance se manifeste dans la manière de compter lorsqu'on mesure le grain, opération à caractère sacré. Voici, par exemple, comment on compte à El Qal'a (Oran); la personne qui compte doit être en état de pureté, et au lieu de dire: 1, 2, 3, etc., elle s'exprime ainsi: *bismi Lllâh* [sic!] (au nom de Dieu), pour "un"; *barkateïn* (deux bénédictions) pour "deux"; *deïfat en nabi* (hospitalité du Prophète, c'est-à-dire de 3 jours),²⁵ pour "trois"; *nerbah'ou*²⁶ *in cha' Allâh* (nous gagnerons, s'il plaît à Dieu), pour "quatre"; *fî 'aïn Iblîs* (dans l'œil du Diable), pour "cinq"; *fî 'aïn ouldou* (dans l'œil de son fils), pour "six"; *ech cheb'a*²⁷ *men 'and Allâh* (c'est Dieu qui nous rassasie),

²³The Companions of the Prophet are of course more than ten (their biographies in the mediaeval Arabic sources fill several volumes); here the phrase 'ten and the friends of the Prophet' is an allusion to the so-called *al-ʿašara al-mubaššara* 'the ten promised paradise', i.e. the ten Companions of Muhammad to whom the Prophet himself promised paradise while living (cf. art. "al-ʿašara al-mubashshara" [A.J. Wensinck] in *EI*²).

²⁴Doutté, *Magie et religion*, pp. 179–180. I have left unchanged the original transcription of the author.

²⁵Allusion to a well-known saying: *ḡyāft ən-Nbi talt ḡyyām*, i.e. "the Prophet's hospitality lasts (only) three days" (said of guests who abuse hospitality, equivalent to the English saying "fish and guests smell after three days").

²⁶I.e. *nərbāḥu*; alliteration with the word *rəb'a/arb'a* "four."

²⁷I.e. *əš-šəb'a*; alliteration with the word *səb'a* "seven."

pour “sept,” etc. . . . jusqu’à “douze,” pour lequel on dit: *el kemâl* ‘*ala rebbi* (la perfection pour Dieu).

4.3. For the Algerian town of Djidjelli (Jijel) and its surroundings, Philippe Marçais gives another important text:²⁸

Le dénombrement des quantités (mesure du grain par décalitre p. ex.) s’entoure, dans la région de Djidjelli comme ailleurs, de précautions prophylactiques : le sujet parlant évite l’usage brutal du terme propre, soit qu’il le déforme pour en faire une eulogie, soit qu’il l’emploie sans déformation dans une formule propitiatoire :

“un”: *b-ismi-llâh* ‘au nom de Dieu’, *waḥd-əllâh* “un seul Dieu”;

“deux”: *la-šarika-lú* ‘pas d’associé à Lui (Dieu);

“quatre”: *erbəḥ* (ou *terbəḥ*) ‘gagne’ (ou ‘tu gagneras’);

“cinq”: *fī-ʿin-eš-šeṭan* ‘(cinq doigts) dans l’œil de Satan’;

“six”: *fī-ʿin-əbnú* ‘dans l’œil de son fils’;

“sept”: *tešbə* ‘tu seras rassasié’;

“neuf”: *tesə* ‘tu seras heureux’.

4.4. Emile Laoust tells us that the Berbers in Rās l-Wād (Sūs) used to count the first ten measures in Arabic (*bārkət əllāh*, *tnayn*, *tlāta*, etc.) but in Berber (*yan*, *sin kraḍ*, *ukkuz*, *səmmus*, *səddis*, etc.) the following ten: it seems that they believed the Arabic numerals could be beneficial for the grain, Arabic being the language of the Prophet.²⁹

5. Finally, it is necessary to remark that the majority of these euphemisms related to numbers are nowadays quite obsolete, especially among urban speakers. The majority of modern Moroccans, for instance, use *təsʿūd* in their everyday life and are perfectly aware that *ḥəmsa* may be associated with the evil eye, but only very few people can remember ever having heard expressions like *ḍyaft ən-Nbi* or *f-ʿin š-Šiṭān* instead of *tlāta* “three” or *ḥəmsa* “five,” etc. It seems that only peasants in rural areas sometimes continue to use such traditional euphemisms.

²⁸Ph. Marçais, *Djidjelli*, p. 423.

²⁹Laoust, *Mots et choses*, p. 402.

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